

# Regional cooperation and transit are vital to Chicago's future

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CRE N Illinois

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Envisioning a more connected, more sustainable Chicago.

Domenic Salpietra, HOK

The recent [Global Climate Action Summit](#) (GCAS) brought together planners, activists and government officials in San Francisco to discuss a blueprint for a sustainable future and to commit to taking climate action.

The GCAS highlighted five key challenges for revising policy: healthy energy systems, transformative climate investments, sustainable communities, land and ocean stewardship and inclusive economic growth. As a Chicagoan and urbanist, the last two of these challenges in particular hit home as I began to envision a more connected, sustainable Chicago.

## **Inclusive economic growth**

One of the many initiatives designed to boost inclusive economic growth in our city is the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's](#) (CMAP) ["ON TO 2050."](#) Adopted in October 2018, CMAP's regional plan prioritizes investments in quality of life issues including development,

the environment and the economy. It also includes a long-range transportation plan. Structured around overarching principles of inclusive economic growth and resilience, this plan is an important step for our region.

*Economic development programs.* Economic development programs can help catalyze inclusive economic growth. In Chicago, a good example of this is the Opportunity Zones Program, in which developers who are building in defined areas in and around downtown are able to receive FAR zoning bonuses by paying into a fund distributed through a grant program that aims to inspire development in targeted city neighborhoods. The owner of a thriving business in one of these neighborhoods, for example, could apply for a grant to upgrade, improve or expand his or her business. This approach generates economic growth in designated business development neighborhoods.



*Regional transit strategy.* Financial strategies only go so far in addressing the issue of inclusive economic growth. The second key factor is physical accessibility to and from these neighborhoods. The two go hand in hand: one connects the region economically, the other physically. Each effort supports the other's potential. To improve mobility, we should focus on both economic developments around our existing transit infrastructure and a broad transit-oriented strategy for connecting designated business development neighborhoods that today are not adequately connected.

The city, focused on encouraging future development around existing transportation infrastructure, also needs to develop solutions to improve access to areas that do not have effective transit options. Rather than continuing the “neighborhood by neighborhood” strategy or the concentration on the connection of neighborhoods to the Loop, we need to improve links between neighborhoods, which together can act as a comprehensive ecosystem for improved accessibility and economic growth. This approach means that instead of just asking, for instance, “How do we get more businesses on 79th Street?” we ask, “How do we expand the potential of 79th Street?”

*Autonomous vehicles vs. alternative transportation.* The recently launched “Autonomous Illinois” program, Governor Bruce Rauner’s state research initiative exploring driverless vehicles, reveals that the focus remains on cars. While this research is worthwhile, it most likely will not help Chicago reduce the emissions required to reach its Paris Agreement goal of delivering inclusive climate action that benefits all citizens equally by 2020, let alone deal with traffic congestion. This initiative, while valuable, is heavily supported by the car share economy

and assumes a continued reliance on our already pressured roadways. If we can take away the need for Chicagoans to rely on vehicles through alternative transportation methods—autonomous or not—we can alleviate congestion in a way that brings lasting change.

Investing in transit links economic growth with environmental sustainability. Compared to a single vehicle, these transit systems move more people, use less space and have much less of an impact on the climate. Consider the space requirement impacts on the city's infrastructure of 700 square feet per person driving a car versus the 50 square feet per person occupied on a bus or subway train.

Transit-oriented development contributes to urban density by taking cars off the road and creating opportunities to reclaim parts of our city's streets for pedestrians, bicycles and scooters. And we know there is a direct correlation between the availability of alternative modes of transportation and the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in specific areas. With a carefully planned approach, inclusive economic growth could evolve from a simple job creation strategy to a bolder move toward equitable transit that results in both jobs and sustainable communities.

### **Land and lake stewardship**

The GCAS highlighted land and ocean stewardship as another critical way of mitigating climate change and making the world more resilient. For our purposes in Chicago, where Lake Michigan is a dominant geographic and economic feature, I've redefined the GCAS's "land and ocean stewardship" priority as "land and lake stewardship."

*Land use and the delicate triangle.* Sitting right outside metropolitan Chicago is robust farmland. Yet climate change is pressuring these valuable food resources. For our city to thrive we need to consider our region's farmland as part of efforts to balance the delicate triangle of urban, suburban and rural development. The health of that in-between area—the suburbs—plays a critical role in bridging urban and rural issues. But how do we accomplish this?

We need to start asking ourselves tough questions about how to re-engage our suburbs when the conventional paradigm for maintaining them is becoming obsolete. How can we take a more sustainable, efficient approach to adding density and curbing infrastructure sprawl?

Perhaps the toughest question facing planners and architects is determining how we can maintain a sustainable landscape through both strategic development and "undevelopment." This means exercising restraint so we can, in some instances, re-naturalize a landscape. In other cases we may place a cap on development that would not be fiscally responsible for certain townships. Or as companies vacate large suburban campuses and move to the city, retail and commercial activities in these areas may decrease and pressure the residential zones to also contract. It's most important for us to focus spending in the right places to create the job opportunities, connectivity and economic activities required to keep an area thriving at the size the market dictates.

*Approaching freshwater resources as a natural system.* Though we're not in peril from rising sea levels, Chicago does have the world's fifth-largest lake as our neighbor to our east. Given the declining supply of clean water across the globe, we can use Lake Michigan to establish a precedent for how to treat fresh water resources. Stewarding these resources forces us to ignore political borders and approach them as a singular natural system. Decisions made in Toronto or Toledo impact the water in our city, and likewise, our water treatments affect them.

Given this interconnectedness, we need forward-thinking leaders from across the public and private sectors to strive for more cooperative, regional policymaking that prioritizes the maintenance of a healthy freshwater ecosystem in the Midwest.

### **Our shared tomorrow**

We need to be wary of overly ambitious, futuristic concepts. Our city's future depends on our regional collaboration and ability to "Think Big," but also enact strategic, pragmatic and effective plans for transforming our urban fabric.

The GCAS reinforced the message that we all are interrelated, and that the actions we take today will directly affect our shared tomorrow. My challenge for all Chicagoans, policymakers, planners, architects and developers is to find new ways to come together to create a more connected Chicago. Let's build that tomorrow together.

### **About the author**

Domenic Salpietra, AIA, is the regional leader of planning for HOK's Chicago practice. As an urban designer and registered architect with more than 13 years of experience, Domenic has a comprehensive background in the planning and development of large-scale, urban projects ranging from commercial mixed-use developments to multifunctional districts and communities. With a passion for cities and an understanding of the increasingly complex, interconnected challenges they face, Domenic emphasizes the relationship between intelligent urban planning and high-quality architecture.